

Changes in the Wisconsin Synod

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One of the most fascinating and revealing articles about 20th-century American Lutheranism (at least for those who belonged to the former Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America) was entitled “Changes in the Missouri Synod,” written by Arthur C. Repp, a professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The article appeared in the July–August 1967 issue of the seminary’s faculty journal, *Concordia Theological Monthly*.¹

Both its subject matter and the date of its appearance were significant. For three decades, the Wisconsin Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Missouri’s former partners in the Synodical Conference, had charged that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod had been changing various distinctive practices which had previously characterized their joint relationship.²

Official Missouri, of course, insisted that it had not changed. A 1911 *Lutheran Witness* editorial said that since humanity’s problem and God’s solution had remained the same, there was no need of change. “We have the same Savior proclaimed to Adam and Eve, the same Gospel which tells us of Him. There is all theology in a nutshell.” It was “good and sufficient hundreds of years ago, it is good and sufficient now.”³ At the height of tensions between the synods in the 1950s, Missouri’s President John W. Behnken called it his “honest conviction” that the Synod had not changed its doctrinal position.⁴

By the mid-1960s, however, Missouri observers were beginning to acknowledge the obvious. “Missouri is changing and knows it,” wrote Martin Marty in 1962.⁵ Two years later, LCMS First Vice-President Roland Wiederanders admitted, “We have not dealt honestly and openly with our pastors and people. We have refused to state our changing theological position in open, honest,

forthright, simple, and clear words.”⁶ By the 1970s, Richard John Neuhaus charged that “any village idiot anywhere in the church knew there were changes.”⁷

Repp’s article not only provided clear evidence that Missouri had changed, but it was specific about the areas in which changes had occurred.

Defining Terms

The very term “doctrine,” and what was to be understood by it, had undergone alteration. In its most basic sense, *doctrine* meant “the teaching that is drawn from Scripture.” No matter how zealously a sound Lutheran attempts to draw his teaching from the Bible, Repp maintained that “as soon as the human element enters into the interpretation” of doctrine, “there is a measure of subjectivity.”⁸ Systematic theologians may insist, as Francis Pieper did, that “all the Christian theologian does is that he compiles the doctrinal statements contained in Scripture (in the text and context), groups them under proper heads, and arranges those doctrines in the order of their relationship,”⁹ but Repp argued that the results of such a process cannot properly be called “objective” theology. “The very manner in which they are grouped, the determination of the text and context, the unifying principle that governs the entire group pattern, are all a matter of judgment. The result is, therefore, no longer objective doctrine but subjective, or applied doctrine.”¹⁰

The Missouri Synod’s two theological seminaries defined a *doctrine* as “an article of faith which the church, in obedience to her Lord, and in response to her specific needs, derives, according to sound principles of interpretation from Scripture as the sole source of doctrine and sets forth in a form adapted to teaching.”¹¹ Accepting that

definition, Repp observed, means accepting “the fact that every formulation of doctrine is conditioned by its historic situation.” Such doctrinal formulations are “conditioned also by the nature of the teaching situation” for which they were intended. With the passage of time and in response to changed challenges and circumstances, the church must “restate or modify its doctrinal statements from time to time if it is to remain faithful to the Scriptures.” In that sense, Repp concluded, “the Missouri Synod has experienced doctrinal changes during its 120 year history.”¹²

Arriving in America during the middle 1800s, the founding generation of the Synod encountered a spirit of “unionism” among neighboring Protestants as well as in the earlier, larger segments of Lutheranism already planted in the United States. Missouri saw itself “in the midst of a life-and-death struggle for purity of doctrine.” If Missourians noted the existence of other Lutherans at all, it was usually to point out the errors harbored within those churches. “With the exception of stray remarks, little was said of the common faith which all Christians, and more particularly Lutherans, possessed in their fellowship with one another.” The very term *brother* was “reserved only for Missourians and later for members of the Synodical Conference.”¹³ Repp’s observation was clearly illustrated in Friederich Bente’s watershed presentation on prayer fellowship in 1905 in Missouri’s theological journal *Lehre und Wehre*. In explaining why Missourians should not pray with Ohio and Iowa Synod representatives, Bente repeatedly characterized the Ohioans and Iowans as “adversaries,” “opponents,” “enemies,” “dangerous heretics,” and “false prophets.”¹⁴

Engagement and Marriage

Sometimes a change in doctrine or practice was caused by “a change in the social life in which the church finds itself,” Repp wrote. Because in Germany engagement had been a highly structured, necessary practice, Missouri taught in America that engagement was “tantamount to marriage.”¹⁵ August L.

Graebner wrote in 1898 that a “valid betrothal” between two marriageable partners “makes the parties to such compact essentially husband and wife before God.”¹⁶ Paul Kretzmann contended in 1916 that the teaching that “engagement was tantamount to marriage” was not to be disregarded as a “Missourian conception of betrothal” because it was also held “not only in the Church of the Old Testament but also in the Church of the New Testament at all times.”¹⁷ Carl Manthey-Zorn went so far as to say that the breaking off of an engagement “is adultery.”¹⁸

As late as 1945, John H.C. Fritz espoused this view in his *Pastoral Theology*: “When two persons competent to marry have, with the consent of their parents, of their own free will and unconditionally, promised to marry each other, they are rightfully betrothed, or engaged, and before God and the Church are therefore husband and wife.” Citing Deuteronomy 22, Fritz reasoned that the understanding that “engagement is equivalent to marriage” was also to be deduced from the fact that “fornication with an espoused woman” was punishable by the same penalty as “fornication with a neighbor’s wife.”¹⁹

But in changing 20th-century American culture, “engagement was not necessarily a legal or a social step toward marriage.” In time the Synod’s doctrinal practice “no longer served its original intent.” Even as Fritz championed Missouri’s traditional view, many pastors were making changes in their practice. Broken engagements were seldom met with disciplinary action, nor was the breaking of an engagement regarded as adultery. This change was noted in an opinion offered by the Concordia Seminary faculty on May 24, 1949: “Our considered opinion is that this question [whether engagement is tantamount to marriage] must be answered in the negative.”²⁰ There was no indication in Scripture that God ordained betrothal or engagement; these practices were of human origin. “Since the Church must not bind upon the consciences of her people that which the Lord does not Himself expressly demand, it is our opinion that betrothal, or engagement, must not be regarded as tantamount to marriage.”²¹ The

matter was further referred to both seminary faculties, who on March 12, 1953, concluded, “The breaking of this promise [engagement] was not the same as adultery, but rather a violation of the law of love and of the will of God regarding the sanctity of marriage.”²²

According to one summation, Luther, historic Lutherans, and modern Missourians taught that engagement was tantamount to marriage, and “to break an engagement could mean excommunication.” But “all that is changed today” after “scholarly study” led to “change and correction within a tradition.” A teaching that “once agitated a church, divided it from other Lutherans, and produced immense trauma” in many lives had become a curiosity “unrecognized by the younger generation.”²³

Taking Interest

Missouri’s chief founder and leading pastor C.F.W. Walther sharply condemned the practice of taking interest. In an 1864 essay “*Die Wucherfrage*,” Walther put the taking of interest in the same category as theft, robbery, adultery, and idolatry. “God Himself here denies eternal salvation to him who practices usury.”²⁴ Following that logic, Walther also concluded that it would be wrong for a Christian to be a stockholder in a bank, since “the banks are nothing but institutions of usury.” (He did allow that ordinary bank transactions conducted by average citizens “seem to have nothing dubious about them.”²⁵) Walther was thinking not only of usury but of any taking of interest. His view was ratified by Missouri’s 1869 convention.²⁶

By 1927, however, after a series of tactical omissions and subtle alterations, Carl Manthey-Zorn concluded, “Nowhere in His revealed Word has God prohibited the charging of interest as such.” In a letter to the faculty of Concordia Seminary, Zorn asked whether it would be appropriate for Synod to state that its position had changed,²⁷ but was told by two faculty members that they considered such a revocation unnecessary.²⁸

Life Insurance

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Missouri Synod pastors strongly opposed the purchase of life insurance.²⁹ Three arguments were usually presented: (1) life insurance “turned death, the Biblical wages of sin, into a matter for profitable speculation”; (2) the insurance business “was founded wholly on selfish principles, not on genuine charity,” because “it advocated doing good only for the healthy rather than those most in need of aid”; and (3) life insurance was based on usurious practices.³⁰

Though it was sometimes later argued that the Synod’s chief objection to life insurance lay in the abuses prevalent in the developing insurance business, this interpretation is “not borne out by the facts.” Abusers were sometimes singled out for special condemnation, but the Synod opposed life insurance itself because it regarded life insurance as contrary to biblical principles.³¹ As with the taking of interest, Walther was the chief architect of the Missouri Synod’s position against life insurance,³² though he was supported by other leaders as well.³³

But by the 1920s, the Missouri Synod and other member bodies of the Synodical Conference had become involved in the formation of fraternal insurance organizations. The 1927 *Concordia Cyclopedia* included an article on “Insurance,”³⁴ which gave “qualified but clear approval” to life insurance. By then, many factors may have contributed to the process of change, but, according to James W. Albers, who studied the attitudes of the Missouri Synod toward both life insurance and the taking of interest, what is most striking is that “the change occurred with very little public turmoil.” The issue was never discussed on the floor of a Synod convention, though at least one of Missouri’s districts passed a resolution regarding it. During almost a half century of public silence between Walther and 1927, there developed within the Missouri Synod a rationalization that made this change of mind acceptable. This rationalization preserved the high esteem accorded the “Fathers of the

Synod” who had previously opposed life insurance, and it allowed many pastors who were still alive but who had opposed life insurance the dignity of saving face. Most Synod members probably never understood the Synod’s opposition to life insurance in the first place, or simply felt the time had come to accept it.³⁵ As William Danker sarcastically put it, “Insurance was [considered] wrong until the Missouri Synod discovered that God’s lightning did not ignore Missouri’s real estate.”³⁶

Still, there were diehards among the Synod’s clergy who knew very well that Missouri used to oppose life insurance and who expected the Synod to continue maintaining that position publicly. The manner of argumentation on both sides of the issue is illustrated in an exchange of more than a dozen letters during 1924 and 1925 between *Lutheran Witness* editor Theodore Graebner and Iowa Pastor W.F. Milbrath. Convinced that the Synod was no longer giving clear voice to its opposition to life insurance, Milbrath asked Graebner for a restatement of Missouri’s position condemning it. Instead of providing such a blanket condemnation, Graebner answered that each insurance contract must be examined individually. Though opposed to every form of insurance that constituted “a gamble with human life,” Graebner commended companies such as the Aid Association for Lutherans for combining death benefits paid by mutual aid societies with bank savings accounts. Milbrath then requested names of specific companies that practiced what Graebner prescribed. Graebner replied that he would condemn a company only if its policies involved “an immoral gamble with human life, or other sinful features.” Clearly dissatisfied, Milbrath countered that if the St. Louis faculty held a different position than it had maintained 15 years earlier, it should say so, and he requested that an article condemning life insurance be published in *The Lutheran Witness*. Refusing to comply, Graebner insisted that there had never been complete synodical agreement on the insurance question and that no Synod member had ever been excommunicated for holding a contrary opinion. When Graebner

charged that the burden of proof now rested with those who opposed insurance, Milbrath countered by citing synodical position statements—by Friederich Bente, Francis Pieper, and *Graebner’s own father*—that life insurance was “wrong and sinful” and a “game of chance.” When Graebner did not reply, Milbrath chided him facetiously for his unwillingness to address the issue. Exasperated, Graebner concluded that “there is as great a menace to the peace of our Synod in separatism as there is in unionism.”³⁷

Military Chaplains

During World War I, the Missouri Synod officially opposed involvement of its pastors in the U.S. military chaplaincy program.³⁸ Since the Word of God demands separation during peace time from churches that teach false doctrine, wrote a *Lutheran Witness* editorialist, “these same words of Scripture certainly forbid our cooperation in the distinctly religious sphere with these same bodies in time of war.”³⁹ Missouri President Frederick Pfothner “drew a line through” an agreement intended to allow the participation of Missouri’s pastors in the chaplaincy, announcing “a stand of absolute isolationism as the only Christian one for the Missouri Synod to take.”⁴⁰ Missouri denounced chaplaincies throughout the war “with exactly the same arguments now employed by the Wisconsin Synod.”⁴¹

Yet already during World War I “an incipient break with Synodical tradition” on the chaplaincy was taking shape.⁴² By 1935, new Synod President Behnken investigated whether men could be called into the Army and Navy chaplaincies without violating scriptural principles. A study committee concluded that “in offering our men for the chaplaincy there is no departure from the accepted Scriptural position of our Synod on the separation of State and Church,”⁴³ and Missouri reversed its policy.

Articles in Missouri’s *Lutheran Witness* throughout World War II highlighted the accomplishments of Missouri’s chaplains. Their duties provided opportunities to witness

to non-Lutherans.⁴⁴ Chaplains reported swelling church attendance at camp worship services⁴⁵ and exemplary service to German prisoners of war.⁴⁶ The chaplains' heroic deeds and promotions to positions of responsibility bolstered Missouri's public image.⁴⁷ The chaplains' activities proved "very effective in directing the eyes of many toward the Lutheran Church."⁴⁸

But the Missouri Synod never admitted that "in World War I [their] position had been a mistaken one."⁴⁹

Antichrist

Repp defined another area of change as one that takes place "due to what may be called an error of judgment or a deep-seated prejudice which failed to recognize that an identification made in history cannot be placed on the same level as a clear enunciation from the Holy Scriptures."⁵⁰ Into that category Repp put the identification of the Pope as the Antichrist. In addition to the statement of the *Smalcald Articles* that the Pope is the very Antichrist,⁵¹ Article 43 of Missouri's *Brief Statement* of 1932 also made that designation. "The literature of the Missouri Synod abounds with many references identifying the papacy as the Antichrist."⁵²

But in 1951 and 1956 the President's Advisory Committee on Doctrine and Practice reported that, in its view "Scripture does not teach that the Pope is the Antichrist," but that this designation was "an historical judgment based on Scripture." Such a conflict "arises in holding that this identifying is a clearly expressed doctrine of Scripture, whereas it is not."⁵³ The report of this committee, together with an explanation issued in May 1956, was approved by the Synod in convention later that year.⁵⁴

The Holy Ministry

Because Walther believed that public prayer was part of the public ministry of the church, he taught that a congregational meeting could be opened and closed with prayers spoken only by that congregation's pastor. Should

the pastor be absent, Walther instructed that a teacher or elder be appointed "to read a prayer selected for such an occasion."⁵⁵ Decades later, John Fritz fully agreed with this concept of the ministry, writing in his *Pastoral Theology*: "Since praying in public is teaching in public, only such should publicly offer *ex corde* prayers as have been called publicly to teach."⁵⁶ By the 1960s, however, this aspect of the doctrine of the ministry was no longer held. Pastors and congregations now frequently encouraged laymen to open meetings with prayer, and occasionally invited them to lead a prayer in a public service.⁵⁷

Issuing a call with a predetermined date of termination was once considered "divisive of church fellowship."⁵⁸ In 1944, however, the Synod adopted a policy mandating retirement for all professors at synodical schools at age 70.⁵⁹ In Repp's view, setting such a retirement date "obviously made every call a terminal one."⁶⁰ The faculty of Concordia College, St. Paul, challenged the Synod's action in 1950 as a violation of the doctrine of the call, and the Fort Wayne faculty voiced a similar disagreement,⁶¹ but the Synod refused to reverse its decision and rejected the charge that this new policy violated the doctrine of the call.⁶²

Sex and Marriage

In the early part of the 20th century, the Missouri Synod taught that a woman's marriage to her husband's brother following her husband's death was forbidden by Scripture. This prohibition of *Schwagerehe*, as it had been referred to, was taught by Walther in his *Pastoral Theology*⁶³ and defended by later Missouri teachers.⁶⁴ Such marriages once called for drastic church discipline.⁶⁵

Along with many other Christian churches, Missouri condemned all forms of artificial birth control.⁶⁶ Procreation was cited as the chief or only purpose of marriage, while contraception was condemned as "perverting the purpose" of holy wedlock.⁶⁷ Birth control was accused of transforming matrimony into "legal adultery" or "legal prostitution," and

such “abominable” things made marriage “far filthier than a pigsty.”⁶⁸

Missouri publications stated that “divorces and separations are the most frequent among couples which are childless or nearly so.”⁶⁹ Genius “is rarely found where there is only one child,” and birth control “logically and inevitably leads to deliberate childless marriage.”⁷⁰ Walter Maier’s 1939 book *For Better Not For Worse* devoted seven chapters to birth control, the titles of which included “The Blight of Birth Control,” “An Outrage Against Nature,” “A Moral Degradation,” “A Divorce Stimulus,” “A Menace to National Prosperity,” “Crafty Commercialism,” and “Its Anti-Scriptural Bias.”⁷¹ *Lutheran Witness* editorialist J.T. Mueller cited as an argument against all forms of artificial contraception the words of New York Catholic Archbishop Patrick Cardinal Hayes, who called birth control “the downright perversion of human cooperation with the Creator.” By such sin, he said, “fell empires, states, and nations.”⁷²

By the 1950s, Missouri no longer championed this strict stand. Alfred Rehwinkel, professor of ethics and church history at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, is often credited with easing Missouri’s opposition to artificial family limitation.⁷³ Paul Hansen in Missouri’s *Walther League Messenger* wrote in 1953 that he found the Bible silent regarding birth control methods.⁷⁴

A Missouri writer in 1880 warned that “dancing has already brought great physical harm, spiritual loss, and the loss of a good name to innumerable people.” It was “as the result of the dance of a frivolous girl [that] John the Baptist was killed.”⁷⁵ An unnamed editorialist in the 1915 *Lutheran Witness* cited a Prof. Hugo Muenstenberg that “license, eroticism, and imitativeness” were “stirred up by dancing movements.” Dr. Muenstenberg referenced many pages of history to demonstrate “how the masses danced when the volcanoes rumbled” and how tyrants “diverted the attention of the crowd by giving dances to the people.”⁷⁶ A 1927 *Lutheran Witness* editorialist argued that “the chief

motive for dancing, as a rule, is to satisfy the lust of the flesh.”⁷⁷

Prayer Fellowship

Repp devoted the longest portion of his article to the practice of church fellowship. “Here,” he wrote, “the Missouri Synod has made a complete circle.” Those who opposed current changes in Missouri fellowship practice “do not go back far enough in the history of the Synod when they appeal to the ‘fathers’ for support.”⁷⁸

Repp argued that in Missouri’s earliest days, Walther and his contemporaries did not regard prayer with other Lutherans to be unionism, despite the weak subscription some of these other Lutherans held to the Lutheran Confessions. In the 1850s, Walther invited all Lutherans who subscribed to the Augsburg Confession to a series of free conferences for the purpose of discussing doctrine. He opened these conferences with prayer and worship, citing the Synod’s “serious endeavor to make progress in the recognition of truth and with the help of God to free ourselves more and more from the errors which still cling to us.”⁷⁹ Free conferences in Columbus, Ohio; Pittsburgh; Cleveland; and Fort Wayne “were opened with a hymn, prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed, and closed in a similar manner.”⁸⁰ Even with the Buffalo Synod, though relations between it and Missouri had grown tense and often bitterly personal, the meeting was opened with a hymn, Scripture reading, and prayers.⁸¹ It was only in the early 1880s, according to Repp, in the heat of the election controversy, that the Synod declined the offer of public prayer.⁸²

Repp also cited “frequent references to pastors participating in some form of worship with Lutherans not affiliated with the Missouri Synod or the Synodical Conference.”⁸³ Again, he charged that “the attitude toward prayer fellowship with other Lutherans changed radically” during the election controversy. “The position of the Synod hardened against all those who disagreed with Missouri in reference to the doctrine of election.” Friederich Bente’s 1904

article on prayer fellowship became Missouri's official statement against prayer fellowship. Bente wrote that in joint prayer, Ohioans and Missourians would not actually be coming before the Throne of Grace with a common prayer, since they would be "praying against one another." Even the Lord's Prayer could not be prayed jointly by Ohioans and Missourians because "the Missourians attach an entirely different thought and desire to the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer than a truly consistent Ohioan would." If Missourians prayed with Ohioans, they would be required not only to have church and prayer fellowship but pulpit and altar fellowship as well.⁸⁴ Bente's essay became "the major proof against any and all prayer fellowship and intersynodical conferences, regardless of the circumstances," an "officially accepted principle of the Missouri Synod that prayer fellowship presupposed fellowship in faith."⁸⁵ In another article, Repp wrote simply that "the Synod's former stand on prayer fellowship" was "born about 1905."⁸⁶ Subsequent intersynodical meetings in 1918 and 1923 were not opened with prayer.⁸⁷

But Repp called it "a breakthrough" that occurred at Missouri's 1941 convention. While granting that "generally speaking, prayer fellowship involves church fellowship," the convention allowed that there may be circumstances in which "the question whether common prayer means fellowship belongs in the field of casuistry."⁸⁸ When a memorial to Missouri's 1944 convention requested clarification of this statement, the Synod officially differentiated between joint prayer and prayer fellowship, ruling that "joint prayers at intersynodical conferences" may be acceptable, "provided that such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error."⁸⁹

This decision brought a storm of protest, with many memorials to the Synod calling this a false distinction. Synod resolutions in 1947 and after, however, refused to return to the Bente position.⁹⁰ As protests also came from the Wisconsin and Norwegian (ELS) Synods, Missouri asked its two theological seminary faculties in 1956 to prepare an extensive study

on the theology of fellowship.⁹¹ This resulted in the publication of *Four Statements on Fellowship Presented By the Constituent Synods of the Synodical Conference for Study and Discussion*.⁹² Missouri continued to study the faculties' document into the early 1960s. Repp believed that the dissolution of fellowship with the ELS in 1955 and with Wisconsin in 1961 "cleared the air and permitted the Missouri Synod to study the theology of fellowship unencumbered by the traditions of its former sister synods."⁹³ By 1967, the year of Repp's writing, Missouri adopted the practice (or, as Repp saw it, returned to the practice) of praying with other Lutherans who acknowledged the Augsburg Confession. This position, "once accepted by the Synod during the first three decades of its history, has again come into its own." Many pastors and laymen of the Synod also "adopted a much broader view of the doctrine of the church" and "[did] not regard praying with other Christians in and of itself a unionistic act." They came to see prayer as "a witness also of the fellowship which Lutherans have with other Christians and not necessarily a denial of the valid doctrinal differences that do exist."⁹⁴

Additional Changes

One change Repp did not mention, but which took place within the time frame referenced by his article, was over Scouting. Missouri's Theodore Graebner was originally the most forceful opponent of Scouting, writing a series of anti-Scouting articles for *Der Lutheraner* in 1916.⁹⁵ His opposition lay in Scouting's moral and religious purpose. Scouting ignored essential ingredients of genuine moral development: the recognition of people's sinfulness and the need for repentance and spiritual regeneration. The Scout Law replaced religious instruction. A daily Good Turn led to pharisaical work-righteousness.⁹⁶ Because Scouting seemed to regard all religions on an equal plane, a Scout might feel obligated to compromise his faith by worshiping at unionistic services with Scouts of different denominations.⁹⁷

Over the next three decades, however, Graebner “not only dropped his objections but adopted a rather positive attitude toward the organization.”⁹⁸ By 1945 he concluded that “charges were made [against Scouting] which can no longer be made today.” In his revised view, Scouting “[left] the choice of church and religion to the Scout’s parents exactly as the public school.”⁹⁹ Under Graebner’s influence, Missouri’s 1938 convention adopted a report concluding that “the national headquarters of the Boy Scout organization have so modified their position as to grant to the individual congregation complete control of its troop.”¹⁰⁰ The Synod’s 1944 convention approved a resolution that “the matter of scouting should be left to the individual congregation to decide.”¹⁰¹

A second change Repp did not mention, because its official recognition occurred after his article was published, was woman’s suffrage in the church. As early as 1938, a delegate to the Synod’s convention objected to an essay statement opposing woman’s suffrage.¹⁰² Authorities quoted Francis Pieper’s *Dogmatics* and referred the matter to a committee,¹⁰³ which never reported. Missouri’s 1953 convention, however, received two late memorials requesting that the Synod reevaluate its position.¹⁰⁴ Reporting back to the Synod three years later, the committee reaffirmed that the Bible forbade women from teaching and directing men, but it did not state that Scripture unequivocally denied women the vote. The report cited historical and practical arguments, such as “our church has prospered under this system” and “our women generally have not been resentful about their exclusion from this voting membership.”¹⁰⁵ Concordia Publishing House refused to print a manuscript by Missouri Pastor Russell Pohl, challenging the traditional understanding of the key passages, and it was subsequently published by a different publisher.¹⁰⁶

In 1965, the Synod adopted a “Statement on Woman Suffrage,” which narrowed prohibition of women exercising authority over men only “with respect to the public

exercise of the office of the keys.”¹⁰⁷ The 1968 report of the Synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations found “nothing in Scripture that prohibits women from exercising the franchise in voters’ assemblies” and concluded that the Synod itself and its congregations were “at liberty to alter their constitutions and their practices to conform to these declarations if they believe that such changes are in the best interests of the congregations and the church at large.”¹⁰⁸ Assenting congregations dropped their ban; women signed church constitutions, voted, and soon appeared as delegates at district conventions.¹⁰⁹

The Missouri “civil war”

Repp concluded that “pastors and people do not wait for the Synod to pass resolutions before changes are accepted and practiced.” Instead, “long before a doctrine or principle is adopted, it has already been taught and practiced within the Synod. Official acceptance always follows practice, even as form follows function.”¹¹⁰

Alan Graebner arrived at a similar conclusion. It was not that the Synod’s official publications clearly and publicly disavowed previously held positions; instead, they carefully “fell quiet” on such matters.¹¹¹ “From opposition to silence to acceptance,” this pattern of change, though “not very graceful or even courageous,” demonstrated “how significant change could occur in a highly conservative American denomination.”¹¹²

Charles Mueller came to the same conclusion in a recent issue of *Jesus First*. “The first LCMS position in all these matters has been to identify what we saw as a Scriptural buttressing of our stance. When *further* and *better Bible study* [emphasis added] weakened our LCMS position, we did not admit that we may have been wrong. We quietly dropped our objections (at least most of us did) and just changed. I can’t remember the LCMS ever recanting any past position.”¹¹³

Theodore Graebner remarked in 1948 that while “all the world takes for granted that conditions may change and that judgments regarding institutions and persons must consider the possibility of change,” in the Missouri Synod this was “brushed aside as completely beside the point.” Signs that change had indeed occurred were accepted only with great reluctance. Graebner lamented that he could not recall in 35 years of synodical literature a single instance in which one of the Synod’s official publications ever publicly acknowledged that the Synod had been in error on any subject. While such an error-free theology “claims orthodoxy” for itself, it is in danger of making the New Testament a code of laws.¹¹⁴

Graebner also decried “the decay of good manners which has befallen certain areas of our clergy.” His expectation that a gentleman—regardless of his profession—would choose his language “with some cautious reserve” had all but disappeared among pastors. Because they considered it their duty “to defend the purity of doctrine, orthodoxy, conservatism, confessionalism,” some clergy felt entitled to attack not only one another’s theology but one’s character as well. With concern for the truth as justification, an opponent “must be pilloried in his ignorance of Scripture, his inability to think logically, his shiftiness and his dishonesty, disloyalty and apostasy.” Such attacks, Graebner insisted, were not mere possibilities, but were “on record in mimeograph and print.”¹¹⁵

The turmoil these changes created in the Missouri Synod became increasingly visible. A growing polarization between conservatives and moderates was compounded by the Synod’s long tradition of independent journalism. Already before the onset of World War I, like-minded pastors mostly in eastern districts of the Synod formed the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau.¹¹⁶ In 1918 the Bureau launched its monthly magazine, *The American Lutheran*.¹¹⁷ Carrying the slogan, “A Changeless Christ for a Changing World,”¹¹⁸ the magazine’s prime goal was to be “inspirational.” It aimed “to encourage individual, congregational,

sectional, and even synodical efforts for the propagation of Lutheran doctrines, history, and principles.”¹¹⁹ The Bureau insisted that it was willing to leave theological issues to the Synod’s “officially appointed organs for the presentation of doctrine and devotional articles,”¹²⁰ focusing instead on offering practical suggestions for community outreach, publicity, enhancing worship, improving church architecture, and streamlining congregational finances.

By the mid-1930s, however, the A.L.P.B. was venturing beyond such “practical” issues. As the Bureau saw it, too many members of the Synod were “hoping for the return of conditions which will never return.”¹²¹ *The American Lutheran* was convinced that “the world in which the Church must function differs from what it was even three years ago” and urged the Synod to go further “than the usual attempts to bolster up and revitalize a tottering system.”¹²² Following Missouri’s 1938 convention, *The American Lutheran* strongly supported union with the American Lutheran Church (A.L.C.). The magazine’s treatment of doctrinal matters, when it touched on them at all, was generally negative in tone, and it downplayed the need for total doctrinal agreement as a prerequisite for church union.¹²³ “Our Church has passed, we believe, both the Scylla and the Charybdis of dead traditionalism and hopeless liberalism,” wrote one editorial writer.¹²⁴ Another felt optimistic enough about the future to predict “the realization of the dream of a united Lutheranism which will carry on the work of the Lord without the dissipation of its energies” to doctrinal quibbling.¹²⁵

Though the A.L.P.B. sought to provide a “loyal opposition voice” in the Synod, by the 1950s its voice came to sound less loyal and more in opposition. As it articulated “previously vague or unpublicized feelings,” and as it promoted a vigorous program of reform, *The American Lutheran* “not only represented but enlarged the reform party” within the Synod. The magazine’s editorial position probably served as one factor “in holding inside the Synod the most discontented” members of the clergy and

laity, “the very group necessary to force the necessary changes quickly.”¹²⁶

A counter movement to the A.L.P.B. and *The American Lutheran* arose in the formation of the Confessional Lutheran Publicity Bureau and its monthly magazine *The Confessional Lutheran* in 1940. Admitting that subjects discussed in *The Confessional Lutheran* would “necessarily be largely of a controversial nature,” its editor promised they would be “dealt with in as wholly an objective way as at all possible.”¹²⁷ Missouri Synod President John Behnken later characterized the stance of the *Confessional Lutheran* as “consistently one of opposition,” looking upon the Synod and its leadership, particularly advocates of union with the A.L.C., as its “opponents.” Behnken regarded much of the criticism featured in the *Confessional Lutheran* as “unwarranted” and “quite sharp,” containing “not a little invective.”¹²⁸

While granting that some teachings “lie farther from the center of the truth than others,” the *Confessional Lutheran* insisted that “all doctrines belong within the compass of saving truth” and that agreement “in the whole sphere of doctrine” was the only acceptable basis for church fellowship.¹²⁹ *Confessional Lutheran* writers anchored their presentation on what they considered to be documented facts, apparently satisfied “to leave their case utterly dependent upon its logical force to compel.” While *The Confessional Lutheran* frequently mentioned *American Lutheran* writers and articles by name, and eagerly sought debate or offered rebuke, *American Lutheran* authors shied away from such confrontation, never referring directly to *The Confessional Lutheran* or responding to its attacks. *The American Lutheran* desired instead to create the appearance of objectivity and to provide a “middle of the road Lutheranism.”¹³⁰

Missouri’s President Pfothenhauer had insisted in 1923 that to speak of liberal and conservative parties in the Missouri Synod “would be absurd.”¹³¹ A generation later, in 1946, *Lutheran Witness* editorialist Martin Sommer maintained that the Synod contained

no liberals, no rationalists, no modernists, and no unionists,¹³² yet he did grant that in addition to divisions caused by heretics in the church, “there are also differences between true teachers.” Sommer warned readers not to “denounce immediately someone who differs with us” but to “avoid bitterness and unnecessary division.” Brothers in the ministry should “frequently consult each other and confer upon matters of importance.”¹³³

By mid-century, however, the Synod once characterized as “a remarkably monolithic structure” and “a utopian model of conservative theology”¹³⁴ found itself engaged in a full-scale “Lutheran civil war.”¹³⁵ Though the battles were at first waged “mainly by the leaders, the pastors,”¹³⁶ the fight soon came to the pews as well. The struggle between moderates and conservatives that “entertained, bored, infuriated, inspired, or depressed” observers outside the church¹³⁷ became a genuine tragedy for Synod members.

Division and Realignment

For two and a half decades following World War II, the Missouri Synod, by one estimate, “was controlled by a coalition of Liberals and Moderates.”¹³⁸ Two years after the appearance of Repp’s article, that was about to change. Missouri’s 1969 convention elected a moderate president for Concordia Seminary in John H. Tietjen. But delegates also selected a conservative Synod President, Jacob A.O. Preus, who interpreted his election as a mandate to investigate rumors of false doctrine at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

By 1973, Missouri Lutherans were engaged in what one observer called “the deadliest politico-theological struggle in contemporary American Protestantism.”¹³⁹ Preus and Concordia’s Board of Control were set to require all faculty members to undergo doctrinal examination. Rather than submit to such an investigation, a faculty majority, together with a majority of students sympathetic to their professors’ circumstances, walked off campus and formed

the Seminary in Exile. Synodical moderates formed the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in 1976—about 100,000 of the 2.5 million members of the Missouri Synod. The A.E.L.C. became one of the three constituting bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988.

Some regard the division in Missouri and the resulting realignment of American Lutheranism as a necessary and beneficial thing. A significant segment of Missouri Synod clergy found itself more in tune with the doctrinal position of the A.L.C. than with the traditional interpretations of their own synod. The membership of the A.E.L.C. was more at home with like-minded Lutherans in the E.L.C.A. Conservatives who remained in Missouri rebuilt Concordia Seminary and regained the upper hand in synodical affairs through the leadership of Presidents Preus, Ralph Bohmann, and Alvin Barry.

But the removal of much of Missouri's moderate element—those most eager for synodical change—has not brought an end to the Synod's internal strife. The civil war continues, though on somewhat different fronts and with changed alignments. John Pless, professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, has identified four constituencies in present-day Missouri. Some "unreconstructed moderates"—the old liberals from pre-walkout days—are still present. Second are what Pless called the "politically correct Lutherans, equipped with the latest in synodically-approved programs and agreeing with the Synod's position, whatever that might be at the time." Third are the "bronze age Lutherans," who consider Francis Pieper the epitome of correct Lutheran theology and regard women voting in congregational meetings a sure sign of heresy. Fourth are the "confessional Lutherans," who "have a strong confessional theology coupled with a respectable liturgical life."¹⁴⁰ Pless clearly favors the fourth group.

Today, most Missouri Synod Lutherans would be shocked and maybe embarrassed to learn that their church body once opposed life insurance, discouraged the use of all forms of

artificial birth control, considered engagement tantamount to marriage, and said it was wrong to pray privately with other Christians. Still, they may ruefully tell the denominationally-adjustable old joke on themselves: "How many LCMS members does it take to change a light bulb?" "Change? We never change!"

Changes in the Wisconsin Synod?

So far, nothing has been said about the Wisconsin Synod and its history of change. But Missouri-watching has long been considered an interesting, even moderately reliable, indicator of what will come to pass in Wisconsin. Former Wisconsin Synod President Carl Mischke noted in 1996 the oft-repeated adage that "the WELS is always 20 years behind Missouri." The person using the adage was usually referring to "something in the WELS that he didn't like," said President Mischke, and would then "point out that he had observed the same thing in Missouri already twenty years ago."¹⁴¹

The Wisconsin Synod held some of the same positions the Missouri Synod once maintained, and on some issues experienced changes similar to those Arthur Repp documented in Missouri. But Wisconsin did not share all the former Missouri positions, and in some cases Wisconsin has remained where both synods used to be.

James Albers concluded that, unlike Missouri, "the Wisconsin Synod's official publications took virtually no cognizance of life insurance." The only reference to that topic Albers discovered in Wisconsin Synod literature was a brief notice in an 1871 issue of the *Evangelisch Lutherische Gemeinde-Blatt* (the Synod's German language magazine for its membership) reporting on the establishment of The Society for Promoting Life Insurance among Clergymen in New York. The author of the notice remarked that life insurance was not to be recommended, since the believing Christian would not have to purchase life insurance to receive the promises of eternal life. In addition, if clergymen were to purchase life insurance, it would show "a loss

of love for God's Word and those who proclaimed it."¹⁴²

Regarding *Schwagerehe*, Seminary Professor Paul Peters in a 1948 essay delivered to the Milwaukee City Pastoral Conference recalled that Adolf Hoenecke, Wisconsin's premier early systematic theologian, had taught (as Walther did) that "the marriage to a deceased spouse's brother or sister is forbidden in Leviticus 18." But a Wisconsin Synod pastor challenged that position, arguing that "there is nothing to adduce or prove that marriage to a deceased spouse's brother or sister is a sin." Peters wrote that particulars of the *Schwagerehe* question were of secondary importance to the larger question of whether "all the laws of Moses still concern us Christians under the New Testament dispensation. And if so, why." Peters explained that "we must differentiate between the relative and the absolute nature of [the Sinai] laws and in doing so be guided by the New Testament and the natural law, not by the fact that Moses has said so and that these laws are a part of the Old Testament." Since the New Testament does not prohibit *Schwagerehe*, neither should we.¹⁴³

Occasional student questions indicate that the notion that engagement is tantamount to marriage lives on among us (and is even summoned as a litmus test of a pastor's conservatism). A recent posting on the wels.net Q & A web site reported, "My prior WELS pastor a few years ago indicated quite strongly that breaking of announced engagements entailed divorce and that the involved parties were bound not to marry others in the future." The wels.net responder said that this "is not the official teaching of the WELS."

Engagement is regarded today as "a cultural custom" and thus "is viewed differently in different cultures and in different times." It is clearly not marriage in today's American culture because "it does not carry with it the blessings, privileges and responsibilities of marriage." The engaged couple "has not made the commitment to each other to be married for life," nor have they met the

government's requirements for marriage. Still, the promise to marry is "a very serious promise" not to be made "frivolously." To break the engagement promise "has the potential to hurt many people."¹⁴⁴ When asked specifically whether the breaking of an engagement is "like a divorce," the Q & A reply, though quite stern about the seriousness of the promise involved and insistent that it be taken to the Lord in repentance, never went so far as to call the broken engagement tantamount to a broken marriage.¹⁴⁵

The Wisconsin Synod has remained consistent into the 21st century in opposing the involvement of its clergy in the government's military chaplaincy program. During World War II, the Synod developed an extensive Soul Conservation mailing effort, assigned temporary camp pastors to military and prisoner of war camps in the United States,¹⁴⁶ and sent civilian chaplains to later wars. "Why wouldn't all churches want to pay their own priests, pastors, rabbis, etc., to be chaplains?" asked one exponent of the WELS position. "Under the present arrangement, the government, especially when push comes to shove, has the chaplains under its thumb."¹⁴⁷ All the reasons for the Synod's refusal to participate in the chaplaincy program in 1935 remain the reasons for opposition today: disregard for the divine nature of the call, violation of the separation of church and state, and the danger of involvement in religious unionism.¹⁴⁸ Ironically, the Wisconsin Synod's sister synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, allows participation of its members in the military chaplaincy program, as a recent article in the *Bethany Report* confirmed.¹⁴⁹

Warnings against dancing can also be found in the *Northwestern Lutheran* of the 1920s and 1930s. Quoting a report from the *Lutheran Herald* that "the roll of the snare drum and the wail of the saxophone" stir "atavistic memories of the tom-tom and the shriek" in young Native Americans, an editorialist in 1921 concluded that if we can give credence to such experts, "there is in the music and the dance of today more than a suggestion of

harmful influence.”¹⁵⁰ By the 1970s, however, some Wisconsin writers sounded less absolute in their evaluations of dancing. “It is quite impossible to claim in our day that all social dancing is sinful because it is either unchaste in itself or provokes to unchastity,” wrote Prof. Edward Fredrich in 1976. “To come down hard on just one kind of close contact when so many others are condoned invites the charge of inconsistency and unclarity.”¹⁵¹

Today student dances are routinely held and publicly announced in area Lutheran high schools and at Luther Preparatory School (and on the premises rather than at off-campus locations). The wels.net Q & A explains that Lutheran and other Christian teachers warned against dancing because they feared sexual temptation was inseparably linked to it, and therefore issued quite sweeping condemnations of all forms of dancing. But Scripture “makes no blanket condemnation of all forms of dancing,” and many types of modern dance “can be expressions of joyful celebration which do not necessarily involve sexual temptation.” The WELS “has never had an official position on dancing” (though that was not so obvious to those among us who heard such “sweeping condemnations” in the past). Instead, dancing is now “an area in which Christians should exercise good judgment.”¹⁵²

The Synod also issued sweeping condemnations of birth control earlier in the 20th century,¹⁵³ and as late as 1954, the author of a sermon on Genesis 38 (the account of Onan), published by Northwestern Publishing House, labeled birth control “race suicide.” When we consider “how general and even respectable this sin has become today,” the author continued, “and then note how God punished Onan with death for it, how can anyone say that the moral standards of the Old Testament time were any lower or less strict than those of today?”¹⁵⁴

A half century later, such blanket characterizations of birth control as sin and “race suicide” are not only no longer made but clearly disavowed. When one questioner on wels.net Q & A asked what exactly the

church’s stand was on birth control, the responder reminded that children are God’s blessing, warned against greed and materialistic motivations, and cited concerns for the health of the mother. “A Christian couple must make decisions on this issue based on these principles.”¹⁵⁵ In answer to a similar question, “Is it acceptable for a Christian to practice birth control?” the responder said simply, “I believe it is.” The decision to use birth control is now included among the larger concern of the stewardship of our bodies and lives. Given a more specific question to consider, the responder said, “It would be easy if I could give you a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to your question, but that would not be in line with God’s Word.”¹⁵⁶

Several web answers acknowledged that previous generations “often condemned birth control,” sometimes because it could be used to sin outside of marriage, sometimes because it was believed to violate a presumed “natural order.”¹⁵⁷ One questioner documented that Augustine, Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Lutheran church father Johann Gerhard, and Missouri Synod teachers John H.C. Fritz and Walter A. Maier all had understood the story of Onan in Genesis 38 as a condemnation of conception prevention; it was “obvious,” wrote the questioner, “that the Christian Church has always opposed the use of birth control.” The questioner then charged that the refusal of the WELS to condemn birth control constituted yet another example of how some in the Synod “are working to destroy [the Synod’s] commitment to Scripture.” Another equally insistent questioner wondered how virtually all the Christian church could have been convinced for centuries that Genesis 38 *was* a clear condemnation of birth control, but that only during the last third of the 20th century could churches suddenly defend a contrary position.

The web site responders delicately replied that no passage of Scripture specifically addresses birth control, maintained that applying Genesis 38 to “any form of birth control” goes “beyond the scope of the passage,”¹⁵⁸ contended that the Onan account is

“descriptive and not prescriptive,” and concluded that Onan’s actions were sinful “because his motive was wrong.” While an appeal to tradition “is sometimes helpful,” and we “may benefit from seeing how previous generations have dealt with an issue,” the responders affirmed that Scripture must be “our sole source of doctrine.”¹⁵⁹ Although it seems clear that the Synod’s teaching on birth control differs at least in emphasis from that of two generations ago, and although it seems equally clear that Genesis 38 is being understood and applied differently today than it was in 1954, neither responder would say in so many words, “There has been a change.”

Compared to dancing, engagement, and birth control, the teaching of the Wisconsin Synod on church fellowship has remained remarkably consistent. Although terms such as “unit concept” and “persistent errorist” did not appear in Wisconsin writing until the 1950s,¹⁶⁰ the roots of those terms go back to the beginning of the 20th century. In reviewing the 1905 Bente essay on fellowship, Edward Fredrich concluded that Bente’s comments could be understood as “an argument for a ‘unit concept’ of fellowship even if that term is not used.”¹⁶¹

To Missouri’s contention that its synodical fathers had maintained a more open prayer fellowship practice earlier in its history, Wisconsin responded that the years before the founding of the Synodical Conference in 1872 should be considered a “period of groping.” Missouri’s invitation to the free conferences it convened in the 1850s was limited to individuals who “subscribed to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession without reservation.” Those individuals were regarded as brothers “as long as they [testified] with vigor against the prevailing errors and for the truth.” This was not joint prayer with Lutheran bodies “persistently adhering to an error.” With the founding of the Synodical Conference, this “period of groping” came to an end, and “the confessional lines of the Lutheran bodies in America had been clearly drawn.” No joint prayer was practiced thereafter with church

bodies not in clear doctrinal agreement with the Synodical Conference.¹⁶²

There were, of course, changes that took place in our churches that were not rooted in specific doctrines but were changes of custom or habit. Thirty years ago, most WELS pastors wore black Geneva gowns when they led worship, regardless of the season of the church year. Some wore white Geneva gowns during the summer because they looked cooler (in temperature) to their members sitting in un-air conditioned churches. (I remember being told by one of our Synod’s “fathers” of a previous generation that he would never trust the theology of any man wearing a white robe!) We have sometimes been quite ingenious in providing a scriptural rationale for our actions. In several old church buildings, metal hat-clips are still attached to the backs of the pews, but only on the pulpit side. Men sat on the pulpit side of the church and removed their hats; women and children sat on the other side and kept their hats on. At the time this may have seemed a perfectly reasonable expression of the roles of men and women. I once read (but unfortunately did not save) the rationale offered for that practice: in the beginning, Adam listened to his wife instead of obeying the command of God, and succumbed to the temptation of Satan, with disastrous results for the human race. Therefore, men were to sit together under the pulpit (with hats removed in compliance to 1 Corinthians 11) so they could listen to the Word of God carefully and then instruct their families. Seventy-five years ago, men sat apart from their families to fulfill their role as godly leaders of their families; today, they will do *exactly the opposite*—sit with their families—to fulfill the same role.

Instead of the somewhat cumbersome definition of *doctrine* Repp cited—an article of faith that the church “in response to her specific needs” derives from Scripture “and sets forth in a form adapted to teaching”¹⁶³—the Wisconsin Synod has more typically talked about timeless biblical principles and changing applications, or, put another way, “Circumstances vary, principles don’t.”¹⁶⁴ Yet

changes in practice or application can sometimes appear to be so great that one is left to wonder whether in fact they are based on the same unchanging principles, or whether there is no longer agreement on the principles themselves.

The Present Tense

The tensions arising over changes in the Wisconsin Synod today do not seem to revolve around birth control, engagement, or dancing—and in the opinion of some go beyond the application of fellowship. Retired Pastor Mark Bartling, in a private letter to the President of the Wisconsin Synod that was made public in *Christian News*, wrote last fall, “The main issues today are no longer fellowship and biblical interpretation,” but “contemporary worship and the Church Growth Movement.” The Wisconsin Synod used to be “united in doctrine and practice,” but today, Bartling wrote, we “are being polarized or misled by the false theology” of Church Growth methods and practices.¹⁶⁵

“We now have an official group in the WELS called Church and Change,” he wrote, adding that “the name alone should tell you something is wrong here.” Pastors are increasingly encouraged to use contemporary worship formats and Church Growth methods but think “they can give it a Lutheran style and flavor.” Though these “user friendly services” are conducted with “the best of good intentions to grow,” Lutheran doctrine “is sacrificed as the church becomes more Methodist and Protestant than Lutheran.” Such forms are “more of revivalism and Arminian than Lutheran,” and “this changing and revitalizing of the historic Lutheran liturgy threatens to destroy Lutheran theology.”¹⁶⁶

The dynamic of such change, Pastor Bartling wrote, is that it comes in stages. Initially, “the changes only ask to be considered as an alternative.” Soon “the congregation is offered both [options] on an equal basis.” This inevitably leads to “the complete rejection of historic worship and even its condemnation.”¹⁶⁷ He wrote:

Americans crave excitement and our churches are being forced to reflect this craving. Just look at some of the articles in *Forward [in Christ]* or what is promoted in the WELS Connection tapes, or the essays at conventions. Christianity is not supposed to be exciting. The word “exciting” does not appear in the Bible. The Gospel worship is not supposed to be “fun” or “dramatic” or “entertaining.” The Gospel as it comes to us in Word and Sacrament is consoling, comforting, saving, powerful, clear, and God will add to His church when and where He pleases.¹⁶⁸

Bartling appealed to the President to “call them back to the old ways that have characterized our Synod in the past.” If they do not return, “doctrinal discipline must be practiced and clearly stated for all to see.”¹⁶⁹

The “Church and Change” group to which Pastor Bartling referred describes itself on its web site as “a growing group of WELS Christians who desire to think and work like the Apostle Paul, who said, ‘I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.’” Further, the group is composed of those who are “interested in practicing and promoting innovation in ministry methods throughout the WELS, especially at the ‘grass roots’ level,” and “who live and breathe innovation in ministry across all spectrums.” While “committed to Lutheran Theology as explained in the Lutheran Confessions,” they are “thinking about, working with, and pioneering different ways to reach more people, more often, with the gospel so the Holy Spirit can do His thing.”¹⁷⁰

Such change has been going on in the WELS for some time, according to the “Church and Change” site. “Innovation in methodology is yesterday’s news in the WELS.” Synodical leadership in many places has been “tweaking (and/or radically changing) ministry methods for years.” God “has raised up men and women, for reasons known only to Him, who are interested in pushing the envelope of

‘gospel delivery systems.’” The goal of the group is “to provide a gathering point, a ‘home room’ for WELS innovators,” and it offers an invitation to “WELS innovators to communicate with one another, and work together where possible to avoid duplication of effort which wastes God’s resources.”¹⁷¹ The site closes:

The world is changing rapidly. Who are the innovators of today who will help us “make the leap from German to English” in this generation? Hopefully, “Church and Change” can encourage the process of helping WELS ministries keep pace with our rapidly changing culture in America, and around the shrinking globe.¹⁷²

In its declaration to remain committed to Lutheran theology and the Lutheran Confessions, in its conviction that a rapidly changing world requires changes in methodology, and in its appeal to become a gathering point for innovative ideas, “Church and Change” bears strong resemblance to the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau in its founding and early activity in the Missouri Synod.

And, like the A.L.P.B., it has aroused opposition. The “WELS in Crisis” blog, launched in November 2005, “provides a place for WELS members (both laymen and clergy) to discuss questionable practices that have found their way into the WELS and to suggest God-pleasing solutions.”¹⁷³ The “questionable practices” the blog addresses center on the decisions of “Church and Change” and the CHARIS Institute to invite non-WELS speakers to address conference attendees “outside the framework of fellowship.” On Martin Luther’s birthday, November 10, “WELS in Crisis” asked, “How Luther-like is the WELS?” That day “a group of WELS pastors and leaders [were] participating in a conference to discuss new and more effective ways of reaching out with the gospel,” the keynote speaker of which was “a professor of evangelism from the United Methodist Church.” Though the speaker considered himself “quite conservative

theologically,” the blog writer remarked, “It saddens us to see some in our synod lowering the wall of separation that should be maintained between God’s faithful people and teachers who depart from His Word. Faithfulness to God’s Word requires that we speak out against this. Faithfulness to God’s Word requires that we not tolerate it or be a part of it.”¹⁷⁴

As to God-pleasing solutions, “WELS in Crisis” wrote, “It appears our words have not fallen on deaf ears.” Despite earlier laments that synodical leaders were not responding to their concerns, they now felt they had “reason to believe that the questions [they] have raised are being weighed by the Conference of Presidents and also, possibly, by the seminary faculty.” The blog expressed “no interest in putting out new material on a regular basis just to hold the interest of [its] readers,” but is “only interested in seeing to it that every doctrine and practice in our church is firmly grounded in and established by God’s Word.”¹⁷⁵

“Issues in WELS” was also organized in 2005 with the purpose of identifying “issues of concern regarding Scripture and its application,” informing “others in the Synod of these issues,” and initiating “public discussion of these issues” in a theological way. Attendance at the group’s initial meeting on February 19 suggested that “enough people are interested to warrant future meetings.”¹⁷⁶ Among the issues initially broached for discussion were implications of the Synod’s Mission–Objective–Vision Statement; the very meaning of the word “Synod” (since it appears “consensus no longer exists”); the concern that education students from Wisconsin Lutheran College were receiving “equal status on call lists” with students from Martin Luther College; the concern that pastors were expected to become “super CEOs” while the role of pastors as “caretakers of souls” [*Seelsorgern*] was being lost—plus questions regarding synodical finances, congregational stewardship, and fundraising for the Synod’s school system.¹⁷⁷

In reviewing the Synod's history, one speaker at an early "Issues in WELS" meeting noted apparent change in the Synod's thinking and methodology. Previously exhorted to be "faithful to God's Word and cling to that powerful Gospel," pastors now are hearing a different emphasis. "Comments were made that we had fought the battle for doctrine, now we needed to move on." Greater stress seemed to be placed on the "how to" aspects of the Synod's mission, and less on the power that lies behind it. The Synod seemed to be looking more to "visionaries" from other denominations who were exerting "greater and greater influence on what we did." While attempts were made to "Lutheranize" such new ideas from other sources, the speaker warned that "when we look elsewhere, we not only forsake the power; our people hear an uncertain voice that undermines credibility and confidence."¹⁷⁸

Another speaker, also reflecting on recent synodical history, suggested that the Wisconsin Synod for at least the last decade has been engaged "in the process of redefining itself." Whether this has been going on publicly or in private, and whether it has been a deliberate effort or unintentional, "one is strongly inclined to paraphrase the marketing slogan and observe, 'This is not your father's Wisconsin Synod.'"¹⁷⁹

An essayist at a September 2005 meeting of "Issues in WELS" asked whether historic Pietism's inclination to diminish the role of the public ministry was surfacing at "the laymen's college, WLC, and its apparently growing *de facto* role as an alternative track into public ministry." The essayist expressed dismay that "WELS Christians seem to have endless resources for WLC and her students, and her many [area Lutheran high school] feeder schools, but little for MLC, the WELS College of Ministry, and her students, and her two remaining prep school feeders."¹⁸⁰

A second essayist in September pointed out that "Church and Change," the CHARIS Institute, Christian Life Resources, the National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts, and other unnamed groups had

secured and advertised speakers "outside the framework of fellowship," with the result that this practice has become "rather commonplace by now in our synod." Asking whether speaking honoraria, travel and accommodation expenses, and publicity garnered from such events constitute "support for the false teacher," the essayist replied that "the answer is clearly yes."¹⁸¹ As recorded in the minutes of that day's meeting, "many speakers shared the essayist's critique of the increasingly common practice in our synod to invite and pay heterodox speakers to address us in our seminars and classrooms," and there was "some debate about the WELS Conference of Presidents' phrase 'outside the framework of fellowship.'"¹⁸²

Following the presentation of an essay entitled "Outside the Framework of Fellowship" at the "Issues in WELS" meeting of January 23, 2006,¹⁸³ the group in attendance approved a resolution strongly encouraging the Conference of Presidents "to declare a synod-wide moratorium with respect to WELS groups inviting heterodox teachers to address their events until we as a Synod have had opportunity to study the matter thoroughly and resolve it in a God-pleasing way."¹⁸⁴

In their growing concern that Synodical practices of the past—and the scriptural principles that undergird them—are being abandoned; in their citation of specific names, groups, dates, locations, and events that they believe are overstepping previously maintained boundaries; and in their call for clearer policies to be enacted and for doctrinal discipline to be undertaken, "WELS in Crisis" and "Issues in WELS" bear strong resemblance to the Confessional Lutheran Publicity Bureau in its activity and intentions in the Missouri Synod.

Observers familiar with the history and culture of both synods suggest that there are at least two differences between what may be happening in the Wisconsin Synod today and what happened in the Missouri Synod a generation and more ago. One is the observation that "the pendulum swings more

widely in Missouri than in Wisconsin”—meaning that various constituent groups in Missouri appear to be more divergent and more polarized from one another than comparable constituencies in Wisconsin. Because the Wisconsin Synod is smaller, because its pastors and leaders are better known to one another, and because its pastors and leaders received a more uniform theological education, differences within the Synod are thought to be less extreme. A second difference is that the tradition of independent, partisan journalism within the

Synod—*The American Lutheran, The Confessional Lutheran, Lutheran Forum, Christian News*, and others—goes back many decades and is more deeply entrenched in Missouri. The groups emerging in the Wisconsin Synod are all of recent origin, and the future of at least one of those groups is at this point quite unclear.

Is it inevitable that the stages of disagreement, division, separation, and realignment that occurred in the LCMS will be reenacted in the WELS?

¹ Arthur C. Repp, “Changes in the Missouri Synod,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 38 (July–August 1967): 458-78.

² For example, Edmund Reim, “As We See It: Who Has Changed?” *Northwestern Lutheran* 39 (December 14, 1952): 396-97.

³ “No Change,” *Lutheran Witness* 30 (September 28, 1911): 153.

⁴ John W. Behnken to “Taffy” (W.F. Klindwirth), August 19, 1955, in Concordia Historical Institute, Behnken papers, Suppl. 1, Box 15, Folder 9; cited by Thomas A. Kuster, “The Fellowship Dispute in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: A Rhetorical Study of Ecumenical Change” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1969), 268.

⁵ Martin E. Marty, “Head First But Not Headlong: Missouri’s New Direction, 1962,” *Lutheran Standard* 2 (August 14, 1962): 5.

⁶ James E. Adams, *Preus of Missouri and the Great Lutheran Civil War* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977), 124.

⁷ James E. Adams, “Missouri Synod Lutherans: Conservative Takeover,” *Christian Century* 110 (August 1–8, 1973): 772.

⁸ Repp, “Changes in the Missouri Synod,” 458-59.

⁹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 52.

¹⁰ Repp, “Changes in the Missouri Synod,” 459.

¹¹ *Lutheran Witness* 75 (May 8, 1956): 178.

¹² Repp, “Changes in the Missouri Synod,” 459.

¹³ Repp, “Changes in the Missouri Synod,” 461.

¹⁴ Friederich Bente, “*Warum koennen wir keine gemeinsame Gottesdienste mit Ohioern und Iowaern veranstalten und abhalten?*” *Lehre und Wehre* 51 (March 1905): 110-15.

¹⁵ Repp, “Changes in the Missouri Synod,” 462.

¹⁶ A[ugust] L. Graebner, “*Medicina Pastoralis*,” *Theological Quarterly* 2 (July 1898): 350.

¹⁷ Paul E. Kretzmann, “Betrothal and Marriage,” *Theological Quarterly* 20 (July 1916): 137.

¹⁸ Carl Manthey-Zorn, *Questions on Christian Topics Answered from the Word of God*, trans. J.A. Rimbach (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1918), 168-69.

¹⁹ John H.C. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), 168-69.

²⁰ *Missouri Proceedings, 1950*, 659.

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